



Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique

French Journal of British Studies

XXIV-4 | 2019

Mutations politiques et économiques du Royaume-Uni, entre perspective britannique et angle écossais

Twenty Years of Devolution in Scotland: the End of a British Party System?

Vingt ans de dévolution en Écosse : fin d'un système politique britannique ?

Fiona Simpkins



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/4938>

DOI: 10.4000/rfcb.4938

ISSN: 2429-4373

Publisher

CRECIB - Centre de recherche et d'études en civilisation britannique

Electronic reference

Fiona Simpkins, « Twenty Years of Devolution in Scotland: the End of a British Party System? », *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online], XXIV-4 | 2019, Online since 25 November 2019, connection on 27 November 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/4938> ; DOI : 10.4000/rfcb.4938

This text was automatically generated on 27 November 2019.



Revue française de civilisation britannique est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Twenty Years of Devolution in Scotland: the End of a British Party System?

Vingt ans de dévolution en Écosse : fin d'un système politique britannique ?

Fiona Simpkins

Introduction

- ¹ It is ironic that in the midst of a fierce debate over the United Kingdom's future after it leaves the European Union, Roger Awan-Scully would remark upon the similarities between the UK and European Parliaments "*whose members are all democratically chosen, but from a disconnected series of separate national contests*". This, he concludes, "*is deeply problematic for the long-term unity and integrity of the UK*".¹ In fact, the European referendum results of June 2016 revealed a striking contrast in the way the different constituent nations of the UK voted: while Scotland overwhelmingly supported continued European membership with a 62% vote in favour of "Remain", together with Northern Ireland where the border counties and Belfast also voted "Remain" as a majority, both England and Wales decisively voted to leave the European Union. Yet, the geographical divides that characterised the outcome of the European referendum should have come as no surprise given the increasingly divergent electoral results of the last two decades in each of the four UK nations. The questions raised by the outcome of the European referendum over the integrity of the UK, with the risks posed by the return of a hard border in Northern Ireland and the possibility of a second independence referendum in Scotland, are symptomatic of the changes that have affected the British political landscape since the late 1990s. While the roots of divergent political patterns across the UK may lay in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales and the long decline of the Conservatives north of the border, as Roger Awan-Scully suggests, we shall contend that the

introduction of devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1999 had the most direct and immediate impact on British party politics.

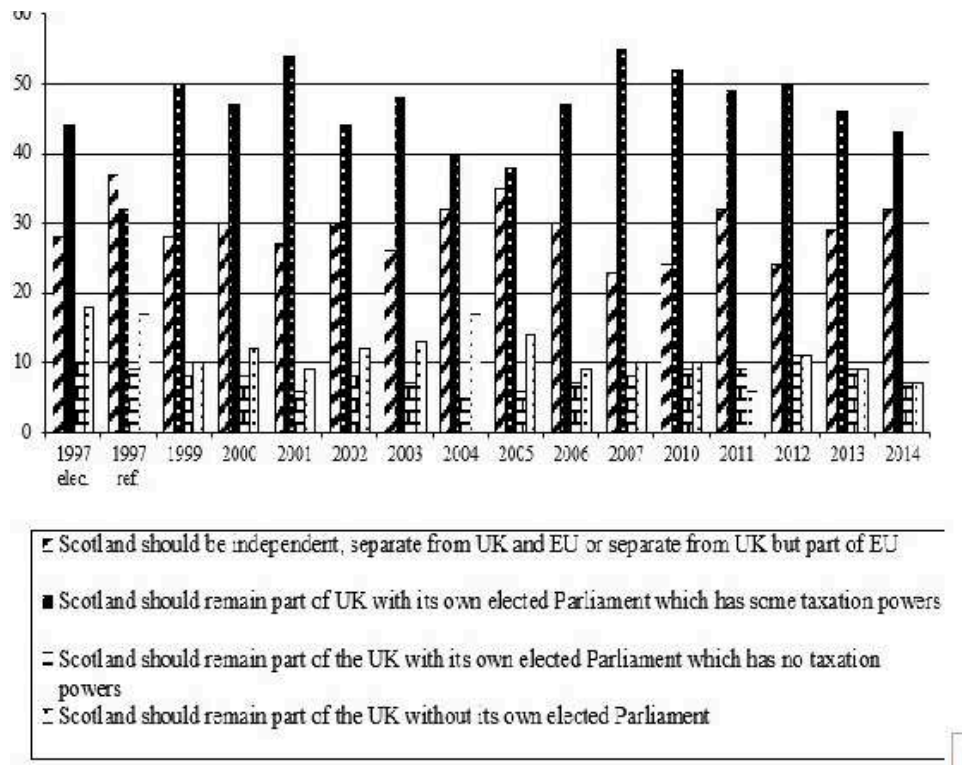
- 2 Admittedly, devolution itself was introduced to rebalance political power in the UK. In James Mitchell's view, "*the whole point of the Parliament was that it was meant to insulate Scotland from a Tory government*"² after the idea of a democratic deficit became widespread during the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s for which there was no majority in Scotland. Yet, with the dominant position of the Labour party in Scotland in the late 1990s and the structural mechanisms integrated within the Scottish Parliament project by the Scottish Constitutional Convention to guarantee smooth inter-governmental relations and prevent the likelihood of a nationalist majority, there was little to suggest how rapidly and sharply Scotland's electoral landscape would diverge from that of its southern neighbour.³
- 3 To the fracture between both ends of the political spectrum, new divides have now been added that cut across it along both nationalist and unionist, as well as pro-European and Eurosceptic fault lines. This has led to the emergence of a distinctive Scottish political debate which produces very different electoral results to those south of the border. The June 2017 general election results are a case in point as Prime Minister Theresa May's majority in Parliament was only saved thanks to the surprising addition of thirteen Scottish Conservative MPs. While the Corbynite youth movement failed to take hold of Scotland where youths were widely radicalised and mobilised by the independence movement, the success of the Scottish Conservatives was largely due to their leader's decision to differ from the Westminster leadership of the party and run a distinctively Scottish campaign that successfully combined unionism and conservatism.⁴ It appears that the Scottish electorate no longer responds to Westminster politics in a similar way to that of the rest of the country and that devolution has created a *de facto* separate political system which spells the end of UK party politics. This paper therefore seeks to examine British party politics in light of the last twenty years of devolution in Scotland and assess the impact of devolution on both the Labour and the Conservative parties, suggesting that both parties' responses to devolution have been key to the increasing rift between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

The rise of Scottish nationalism

- 4 The SNP's electoral breakthrough of 2007 set a momentum for deeper political change in Scotland. Although it only obtained one more seat in the Scottish Parliament election of May 2007 than its Labour rival (47 seats to Labour's 46 seats), the SNP's formation of a minority government paved the way for its success at the May 2011 Scottish Parliament elections when it managed to obtain an overall majority of seats despite an electoral system explicitly designed to prevent this from happening. The formidable rise to power of the SNP in Edinburgh did not, however, appear to correspond to any surge in either an exclusively Scottish identity or to separatism. The successive Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys published between May 1999 when the Scottish Parliament first came into existence and the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 (after which the question was no longer included in the surveys) show neither a hardened sense of identity in Scotland nor stronger separatist feelings among Scots. The results of the surveys showed that there was no marked movement in

favour of independence before the Scottish independence referendum of September 2014, as shown in the graph below: 28% of Scots were in favour of independence in 1999 when the Scottish Parliament first opened, 23% in 2007, 32% in 2011, 24% in 2012 and 32% in 2014 on the eve of the Scottish independence referendum.

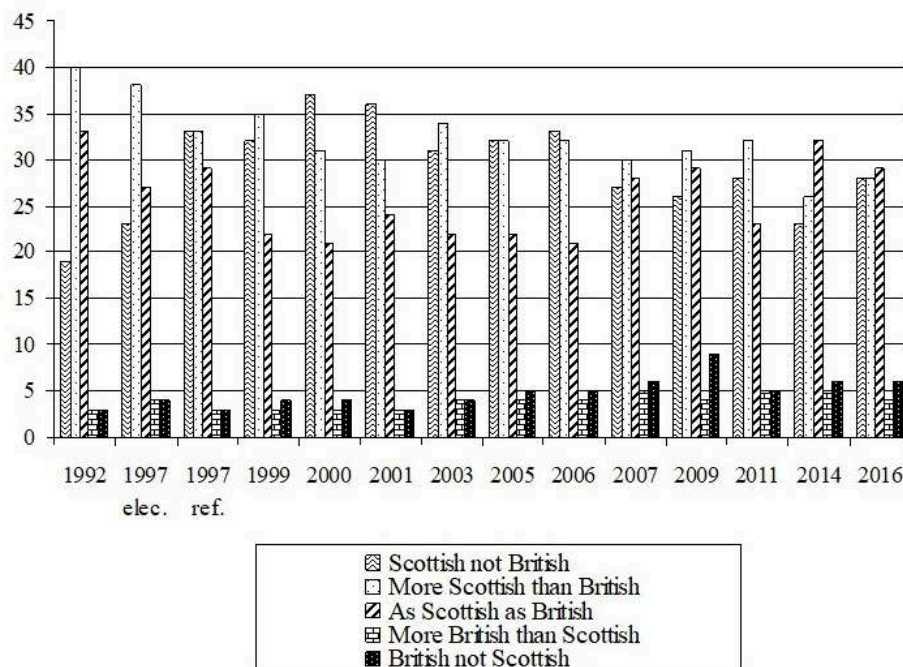
Support for independence 1997-2014



Source : Results compiled from Scottish Election Studies (1992-1997), Scottish Referendum Survey and Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys (1999-2014).

- 5 Neither did devolution affect Scottish national identity. The Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys admittedly witnessed a steep rise of the percentage of people who considered themselves “Scottish and not British” and rejected a dual identity between 1992 and the introduction of devolution in Scotland in 1999 (from 19% in 1992, when the question was first asked, to 33% in 1997 and 32% in 1999). Indeed, this can be explained by the rejection of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s as well as initial enthusiasm for devolution in Scotland. However, this trend has tended to stabilise since then (28 % in 2016) while the number of people who considered themselves as equally Scottish and British has risen slightly, particularly on the eve of the 2014 independence referendum (32% in 2014 and 29% in 2016). In fact, all trends have been remarkably stable since the 1997 referendum, which suggests that neither devolved politics in Scotland, SNP electoral victories or the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 have durably affected Scottish national identity in the last twenty years.

Scottish identity on the Moreno scale, 1992-2016



Source: Results compiled from Scottish Election Studies (1992-1997), Scottish Referendum Survey 1997, Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys (1999-2016), ICM (2009).

- 6 In fact, according to an April 2018 BBC poll by YouGov, the percentage of people in Scotland who strongly identify themselves (61%) or fairly strongly identify themselves (23%) as being Scottish is equivalent to the percentage of people who strongly identify themselves (58%) or fairly strongly identify themselves (25%) as being English south of the border. Besides, similarly to Scotland where national identity trends have remained stable, polls have indicated that there was no hardening of an English identity either.⁵ Yet, the idea that national identities in the UK have become stronger in recent years and are weakening the British Union has become commonplace. A series of Policy Exchange polls by Deltapoll of May 2018 found that 60% of people polled believed that people today identify more with their home nation than with the UK than five or ten years ago, 15% believed that people identify more with the UK as a whole and 19% believed there was no difference. A majority of people also believed that stronger national identities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were weakening the UK with 17% believing they weakened the UK a lot, 39% a little and a minority (26%) not at all. Overall, most people held pessimistic views of the future of the British Union with 52% believing it would not hold together within the next hundred years and only 19% believing it would. If these widely held beliefs are not supported by any sharp surge in national identities in the UK, they most likely reflect the rise of the SNP in Scotland and the growing political divergences between UK nations.
- 7 Indeed, while the SNP had trouble making any real electoral breakthrough in general elections due to the first-past-the-post system and the fluctuating support for the party before the introduction of devolution, the Scottish Parliament and its semi-proportional electoral system provided the Nationalists with a new political platform and an ideal constitutional set-up to advance the case of independence.⁶ Prior to devolution in 1999, the SNP had sought to win a majority of seats at Westminster and

use that as a mandate for independence but any substantial electoral success failed to materialise as the party was set back by the first-past-the-post system and had trouble bridging internal divisions between gradualists, in favour of a step by step approach to independence, and fundamentalists, advocating independence and nothing less. These divisions were largely overcome after devolution was introduced: while a Scottish Parliament fitted well with the gradualists' strategy, fundamentalists found that the Scotland Act 1998 created a new institutional structure in which the party would be better able to win votes and seats thanks to its semi-proportional electoral system. Some within the party considered that Holyrood would serve as an easier political and institutional platform to hold an independence referendum as it made the prospect of an electoral majority more likely.

- 8 The SNP's strategy for independence therefore came to rest upon government office in the Scottish Parliament as it presented several key advantages. The first was that the SNP was able to use the powers and responsibilities held by the Scottish Parliament in key matters such as health, education, agriculture, fishing and fisheries, or the environment, to name but a few, to articulate distinctive policies which fit well with the overall centre-left consensus in Scottish politics, such as abolishing prescription charges, scrapping bridge tolls or replacing the council tax with a local income tax. These policies would also be given more traction as the Nationalists could present their party as the only party with no British counterpart that could speak for Scotland and defend its distinctive interests. In doing so, the SNP would also exploit the flaws of the new constitutional set-up itself to demand more powers for the Scottish Parliament, short of independence. This strategy therefore enabled the party to decouple voting SNP from independence as it made independence much less immediate. The discrepancy between the percentage of votes obtained by the SNP at Scottish Parliament elections and the level of support for independence suggests that this decoupling strategy was successfully achieved. While the SNP obtained 32.9% of the constituency vote in 2007, support for independence was as low as 23% according to Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys of that same year. Likewise, the Nationalists obtained 45.4% of the constituency vote in 2011, although support for independence then stood at 32%. While the Nationalists managed to form a minority government in 2007, their attitude to an independence referendum during their first term in government suggests their awareness of the limited support for independence in Scotland despite their positive electoral scores. Indeed, the party prudently proposed holding an independence referendum in the latter stages of a Scottish parliamentary term and preferred holding a vast public consultation on independence first, significantly named National Conversation.
- 9 After having been on the fringes of political power at Westminster for years, the SNP became Scotland's second political party as soon as the 2003 Scottish Parliament election. Its formation of a minority government in 2007 enabled it to assert its competence over key economic and social issues in Scotland whilst attempting to develop at the same time a support base for its flagship separatist policy. Its avowed strategy was to show that it was able to deliver on key policy pledges and boost voter confidence in relation to a further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament, before perhaps full independence for Scotland. Yet, it was only after the SNP unexpectedly won a majority of seats in 2011 on a manifesto explicitly pledging to organise an independence referendum, that the party was able to build up on its promises and launch the Scottish independence referendum of 18th September 2014.

Although the issue of independence had long been the party's *raison d'être* and been presented as its primary objective at a number of elections over time, it was only after the SNP obtained 69 seats, thus achieving to form the first majority government in Edinburgh, that Scotland's other political parties recognised the SNP's mandate to do so.

- 10 In his seminal study of the SNP, Peter Lynch notes that the Nationalists' unexpected electoral success in 2011 and the opportunity provided to organise an independence referendum meant that the party had little room for error in devising its strategy ahead of the referendum.⁷ Whilst the idea of a two-step referendum on enhanced devolution and independence had been floated during their first term in government, polls indicated that there was no widespread support for independence but that enhanced devolution appeared as a majority's preferred option. The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey of 2011 indicated that independence was only supported by 32%, compared to 58% support for enhanced devolution. The two-option referendum thus appearing counterproductive, and even threatening to the SNP's desired outcome, the intergovernmental negotiations with the UK government and the Edinburgh Agreement signed on 15th October 2012 therefore led to the setting up of a single question referendum on Scotland's independence. Yet, the main difficulty remained that of securing a Yes vote to deliver independence: the Nationalists would have to run an "uphill struggle" type of campaign to convince a majority of heretofore sceptical voters to change their minds about Scottish independence.⁸
- 11 The referendum campaign ran from May 2012 to September 2014, with the Yes campaign having opted for a long campaign in order to allow itself sufficient time to build momentum and support for independence across Scotland whilst the No campaign was short (May to September 2014) and focused negatively on specific issues such as the economy and business interests, the currency used by an independent Scotland or EU membership among others.⁹ The analysis of the Yes campaign and the conversion of large numbers of people to support independence from a relatively low existing base have been discussed at length.¹⁰ Indeed, Yes Scotland's strategies and organisation serve as an interesting example of a single-issue campaign successfully growing into a mass social movement which continued to expand after it lost the referendum of September 2014, having achieved 45% of the vote. Although its outcome was the *status quo*, the long independence referendum campaign appears to have transformed Scottish politics on a much deeper level than might have been expected. SNP membership soared as it became the third largest political party in the UK and its electoral results soon followed suit as the May 2015 general election results returned a "nationalist tsunami"¹¹ of 56 SNP MPs to Westminster out of a total of 59, sending shockwaves in UK political circles.
- 12 The May 2016 Scottish Parliament election results – albeit less spectacular – confirmed the profound changes that had appeared in the Scottish political debate as the SNP secured a third term in government, falling only two seats short of a second consecutive overall majority in the Scottish Parliament. The division between the pro-independence parties led by the SNP within the Yes campaign and the three main unionist parties sharing a single political platform within the Better Together campaign has appeared to survive the referendum and created a new binary system centred along a fracture between unionists and nationalists. The three partners of the Better Together campaign represented both the left and right wings of the political

spectrum, yet their association to represent a common position within a single organization during the independence referendum campaign suggests that these traditional left/right divisions were largely made redundant when the main issue at stake was the constitutional future of Scotland.

Unionist parties and devolution: the case of Labour

- 13 Although Scottish Labour and the Scottish Conservatives shared a unionist platform, there were significant differences in their attitudes towards devolution and Scotland's constitutional position. The Labour party had fully participated in the Scottish Constitutional Convention and introduced devolution under Prime Minister Tony Blair, but the Conservative party had been traditionally opposed to devolution which, it claimed with considerable foreboding, would serve as a "slippery slope to independence". The introduction of devolution to Scotland in 1999 was therefore apprehended in a very different way by each party and a comparison of both parties' structural and organizational evolution since 1999 may give some clues as to the impact of devolution on each party's electoral fortunes in the last twenty years. Indeed, both parties had to adapt to the new political structures introduced by devolution and embodied by the new Scottish Parliament, but also to a distinctly Scottish political debate, removed from the pan-British political system in which both parties had been hegemonic since the post-war period. While comparative studies on multi-level party politics suggest that there is often a declining capacity of the major parties to maintain political hegemony due not only to a proliferation of new party alternatives, as is the case in Scotland, but also to a pluralization of political rifts with the classical functional divides of class and religion losing saliency in structuring party competition, they also point to regional advocacy as a central strand of sub-state party competition.¹² In other words, campaigning on specific Scottish issues and in defence of distinct Scottish interests became key to winning elections. However, this was all the more difficult for UK-wide parties such as Labour and the Conservatives as the context of governing diverged between Westminster and Holyrood. Both parties soon struggled to elaborate uniform party strategies and policy platforms which would be satisfactory to voters north and south of the border and provide solutions and benefits to all parts of Britain despite each nation's distinctive economic and social characteristics, interests and concerns. Besides, the constitutional issue proved to be a particular stumbling block for Labour. While the two main British parties needed to find programmatic answers to the SNP's demands for independence, the Labour party found it perhaps more arduous to propose a satisfactory compromise between the SNP's independence stance and the Conservatives' *status quo* and to adopt a clear position within the starkly polarized unionist-separatist political divide. We shall see that the European referendum of June 2016 and the Brexit process would further exacerbate those difficulties as the Remain/Leave divide followed neither strict partisan lines, nor the constitutional divide.
- 14 Until 2007, Labour was in power in both London and Edinburgh and while coalition politics in the latter provided some degree of divergence, partisan harmony and policy coherence were facilitated by the party's electoral hegemony as well as a common political ground shared by the leaderships of both the UK and Scottish parties. Laffin *et al.* note that conflicts between the UK party and the Scottish party were few and far between while Labour was in power in both Westminster and Holyrood, thus indicating

either a high degree of party consensus or strict leadership efforts to avoid overt disagreements by marginalising opponents, stifling contradictory demands, shaping rules or managing the decision-making process.¹³ Indeed, there appeared to be a strong impetus to respect the message and creed of British Labour and a top-down approach to policy was itself ensured by the then highly centralised structure of the party.

- 15 Admittedly, Labour did take into account to at least some degree the need to decentralise some policy-making responsibilities after having introduced devolution. A new Scottish Policy Forum was created in 1998. It was modelled after the National Policy Forum, responsible for UK policy development, and would propose and elaborate policy ideas in devolved matters. Its recommendations would be subjected to the decision of the Scottish Conference and, if approved, could be added to the Scottish manifesto. Besides, the Scottish Conference, which had only held an advisory function before devolution, became a sovereign body capable of determining by a two-thirds majority which devolved policy item could form part of the Scottish Labour party's programme and perhaps be included in its manifesto. However, the final drafting of the manifesto remained the responsibility of a committee equally drawn from the Scottish Executive Committee and the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Group and these changes therefore continued to imply a continuous top-down process involving the party leadership rather than a bottom-up approach to policy. Reserved matters were furthermore decided by the national policy procedures within the National Executive Committee and Scottish Labour was allowed very little input with its modest contribution of 12 members out of a total of 180 in the National Policy Forum. Although the responsibility of candidate selection was entrusted to the Scottish Executive Committee (SEC) for Holyrood selections, the National Executive Committee – to which the SEC remains accountable – kept jurisdiction over all other selections. Finally, the relative autonomy of the Scottish party was also minimized by the material support of the UK party upon which the Scottish party has become increasingly dependent¹⁴, thereby tempering divergence in policy choices.
- 16 The Scottish Labour party was nonetheless able to somewhat overcome this structural straitjacket and pursue a divergent political path to that proposed by the pro-business market-oriented New Labour party in London while it was in government. Yet this was due to Scotland's distinct institutional landscape and to the new centre-left consensus that emerged in the Scottish Parliament. In contrast to its British counterpart in Westminster, Scottish Labour had to compete with other centre-left parties rather than the Conservative party. Rather than being fought across the left-right continuum, the Scottish electoral battle took place in a left to centre arena with the constitutional question cutting across it, thus requiring a more flexible approach to policy. One of the main divergences came over the question of tuition fees as a result of the coalition agreement between Scottish Labour and the Scottish Liberal-Democrats. The latter having argued in favour of scrapping tuition fees altogether in Scotland, a compromise was reached between the two partners of the new Scottish Executive and a Graduate Endowment Grant scheme was introduced in Scotland with the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Act 2001, whereby students would not have to pay for their tuition fees up front but would reimburse a fixed amount of £2,289 after having graduated. Some areas of policy such as education or health therefore inevitably diverged north and south of the border, yet there were surprisingly few clashes over policy and party discipline appeared to have prevailed. The row over free personal care to the elderly was the most notable exception as its introduction in

Scotland made it difficult for British Labour to argue that the policy was unaffordable without appearing incoherent.¹⁵ Yet, the Scottish party itself was bitterly divided over the issue and the row did not, therefore, represent a straightforward conflict between the UK and Scottish parties. In fact, it was not before November 2007 that a true rift did emerge between both parties. Unsurprisingly, the bone of contention was that of an independence referendum which former Scottish leader Wendy Alexander called for during a live BBC interview (the famous “Bring it on” episode). Her bold move was not supported by her colleagues in London or by the Prime Minister. She was thereafter obliged to back down and was shunned by the Labour leadership when she became caught up in a campaign funding scandal which ultimately led to her resignation. The episode suggested that policy divergences were admitted so long as they concerned devolved matters and did not question or undermine the Labour party’s brand politics and message. Yet, it also pointed to the inherent weakness of the Scottish Labour party as it had to choose between the cohesive electoral message of the party as a whole and its own electoral priorities in a different political landscape.

- 17 Indeed, Labour’s position on the political spectrum in Scotland’s devolved political environment has proved to be particularly problematic. While its UK counterpart faces little competition to the left, Scottish Labour has to contend with several left and centre-left parties, including the SNP, RISE (which was formed out of the union of several radical movements active in the independence referendum campaign) and the Scottish Greens. There are, for instance, few differences to be found between Labour and the SNP on a wide set of issues, as both parties broadly agree on opposing cuts to public services and protecting the welfare system, opposing the renewal of Trident and supporting a living wage. This makes it particularly difficult for Labour to distinguish its political programme and brand message from the other centre-left to left parties in Scotland, notably with that of the SNP, whose leader, Nicola Sturgeon, remains the most popular political figure in Scotland.
- 18 In contrast, Scottish Labour has had eight different leaders since the introduction of devolution with few high-profile figures among them. With party heavyweights and ambitious young politicians preferring to build their careers in Westminster, the Scottish Labour party’s electoral scores have consequently suffered from its lacklustre leaderships and campaigns. Besides, the radical momentum created by Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership election in September 2015 failed to take hold of Scotland where the core issue of Scotland’s constitutional future and the radical character of the pro-independence movement during the referendum debate in Scotland have acted as a substitute to the kind of radicalism that has attracted young activists back to Labour elsewhere in Britain, notably through the student fees protests south of the border. In a nation where there are no student fees, the political awakening of young voters came not with the fees movement but with the independence campaign.¹⁶ Scottish Labour has consequently failed to renew its membership and voter bases as the young radical vote in Scotland has now defected to pro-independence parties, not least to the SNP whose members below the age of 30 account for 21% of its total membership.
- 19 Finally, Scottish Labour’s position over the constitutional future of Scotland has plagued the party since the independence referendum of 2014. Scottish Labour’s doomed decision to participate in the Better Together No campaign alongside the two coalition government partners of the time has durably damaged the party’s image, firstly because it stood on the same political platform as the Conservatives and

secondly because of the negativity of the Better Together campaign. The Better Together campaign was led by a senior Labour figure, Alistair Darling, and became an easy target for the SNP, which could present the umbrella campaign as a Conservative-led initiative which gathered three British rather than Scottish parties and generally defended austerity policies and welfare cuts. The 2014 referendum campaign has therefore lastingly damaged the Labour party's image in Scotland as well as its electoral scores.

- 20 The Scottish Labour party was almost wiped out in the 2015 general election and only retained a single seat in Scotland, like both its unionist rivals, while the SNP won 56 out of the 59 Scottish Westminster seats. It then lost 13 seats in the May 2016 Scottish Parliament elections and was unable to take advantage of the outcome of the June 2016 European referendum in which a majority of Scots voted Remain. Indeed, Scottish Labour only managed to win a handful of seats (7) in the 2017 general election despite the extraordinary circumstances created by the Brexit context. The Labour party's ambiguous position over the Brexit issue, its divisions over the issue and its hesitations to back a "People's Vote" meant that it failed to seize the opportunity provided to use the campaign as a pro-European platform in Scotland. Meeting little resistance from Labour and taking advantage of the divisions created by the European issue within Nationalist ranks, the Scottish Conservatives were able to minimize the issue during the campaign, preferring instead to concentrate on the constitutional issue and fighting a staunchly unionist campaign. Against all odds, the Conservatives made a shock electoral comeback in Scotland as they won 13 Scottish seats and saved Theresa May's Conservative government.

The Scottish Conservatives: unionism, Europe and the constitutional issue

- 21 Indeed, the Scottish Conservative Party came out of the independence referendum campaign unscathed and ascertained in its belief that it stood for Scottish unionism, which it thereafter fully embraced as its flagship policy in ensuing electoral campaigns. However, rather than opposing devolution as a "slippery slope to independence" as it had before the 1997 referendum, the Conservatives now fully engaged in devolved politics and supported Scottish unionism in a devolved environment. Indeed, the Conservative party had felt compelled to engage in a soul-searching debate over its internal territorial structures after it failed to win a single seat in Scotland in the 1997 general election. Although the Scottish Unionist Party had remained an affiliated yet constitutionally separate party until 1965, direct authority was thereafter exercised by the British leadership and the Conservative Party had maintained a very centralized approach to party organization. The shock results of 1997 nevertheless led the Scottish Conservative Party to become an affiliated partner of the Conservative Party. It continued to participate fully in UK-wide processes, but its organization and internal procedures, over which it gained statutory control, were now independently managed. The Party Constitution therefore holds that Scottish members are obliged to follow UK party rules with respect to UK matters but will follow Scottish party rules with respect to Scottish matters, thereby enabling the Scottish party to acquire more autonomy in its management of devolved policy-making and organization. Besides, it was never as

dependent as Labour on membership fees, despite a similar centralist funding model, because the bulk of its funding is provided by individual donors and corporations.

- 22 The 1998 party reform established both a party executive committee (Governing Board) responsible for the management of the party and a Conservative Policy Forum, charged with organizing policy debates and programmatic development. The Forum only has an advisory character and the elaboration of policy programmes and electoral manifestos remains largely in the hands of the parliamentary leader and his/her inner circle. Yet, in contrast with Scottish Labour, the Scottish Conservatives have enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy with respect to devolved policies as the Scottish election manifesto emerges from within the Scottish Conservative parliamentary group and is debated within the Scottish constituencies and the regional party executive. The Scottish Conservatives can therefore develop their own proposals for Scottish matters without formal interference by the national party leadership. This autonomy has thus enabled the Scottish party to develop a more moderate, centrist policy profile on devolved issues in order to better adapt to the new devolved Scottish political landscape.¹⁷ Yet, the Scottish Conservatives' fundamental conception of unionism remained intact until the 2014 independence referendum.
- 23 The 2011 leadership election was the first contested leadership election since the introduction of devolution and therefore provided the opportunity for a public discussion of the future of the party. Two factions emerged during the campaign, with one faction arguing that devolution should not be enhanced any further and that the Scottish Conservatives should remain integrated to the UK Conservative Party, and another claiming that the Scottish Conservative Party had become more autonomous and should be open to leading the debate on further powers to the Scottish Parliament. The former view was represented by Ruth Davidson, Jackson Carlaw and Margaret Mitchell, while the latter was strongly defended by Murdo Fraser in his leadership bid as he argued that the party should disband and reform itself as a Scottish party modelled along the lines of the former Unionist Party, that is a separate party with MPs nevertheless taking the Conservative whip at Westminster. With Ruth Davidson narrowly elected as leader, it appeared that continuity had prevailed and that the Conservatives would remain opposed to any further extension of the Scottish Parliament's powers. Yet, the new Scottish Conservative leader was soon forced to change her mind by Prime Minister David Cameron's own admission in a February 2012 speech that "This does not have to be the end of the road. When the referendum on independence is over, I am open to looking at how the devolved settlement can be improved further"¹⁸. The Conservative-led Coalition government's strategy was to accept the organisation of a referendum, which was now unavoidable, on terms it found acceptable and to avoid appearing anti-Scottish in a bid to save the union. Ruth Davidson therefore had no choice but to come round to the view initially expressed by Fraser and set up a Conservative commission to examine the current devolution settlement and make proposals for a possible extension of the Scottish Parliament's powers. The Commission on the Future Governance of Scotland published its report in May 2014 and made rather timid proposals for further devolution to Scotland, suggesting that the Scottish Parliament should become responsible for setting rates and bands of income tax throughout Scotland but that pensions should stay within the remit of the UK Government, and admitting there was a case for devolving housing benefit and attendance allowance as well as conferring the Scottish Parliament the

power of supplementing benefits legislated for at UK level. These proposals, however, represented a revolution for the Scottish Conservative party as it finally came to terms with devolution and attempted to reconcile a Conservative brand of unionism with a centre-right case for further autonomy, particularly regarding fiscal powers.

- 24 The Scottish Conservatives were thereafter able to build upon a coherent unionist strategy which integrated both conservative political thought and further autonomy for Scotland, and the strong Scottish credentials of their new leader, whose working-class background and comprehensive education made it possible for her to present herself as an untypical Tory and put what she described as “clear blue water” between the policies of the Scottish Conservatives and those of the UK party. Ruth Davidson has indeed frequently shown her independence from Westminster politics: she was a staunch Remain supporter during the referendum campaign and has repeatedly said since then that she was favourable to “*an open Brexit, rather than a closed Brexit*” with the “*largest amount of access*” to the Single Market. She challenged a number of immigration policies espoused by May during her time as Home Secretary and urged the Prime Minister to reconsider the Conservative target to cut net migration to below 100,000 a year as well as drop “easy slogans” on immigration. She signalled her opposition to May’s deal with the DUP by tweeting a link to the same-sex marriage lecture she gave at Amnesty’s Pride lecture in Belfast in 2016, sought and received assurances from the Prime Minister that she should try to advance gay rights in Northern Ireland despite the DUP’s record on such issues. Finally, she has admitted to being a centrist in terms of social policy with a more right-wing stance on justice and fiscal policies.
- 25 The diverging strategy of the Scottish Conservative party from its UK counterpart became most apparent during the 2017 general election campaign. Ruth Davidson chose to concentrate on the constitutional issue despite the “*strong and stable*” campaign message that her party had set out to develop nationally in order to make of the 2017 general election one that focused on the Prime Minister’s persona and would strengthen her hand to deliver Brexit. Although she was under pressure from the party leadership to respect the Conservative campaign message, Ruth Davidson’s decision to stray away from it proved correct because the political debate north of the border has become strikingly different. Firstly, the SNP’s campaign was overshadowed by the European question despite its attempt not to focus only on its “independence in Europe” mantra or on the issue of a second referendum. This considerably divided the SNP’s electorate as nearly a third of Yes voters at the 2014 referendum and an estimated 36% of SNP voters voted Leave at the EU referendum. In fact, a YouGov poll of January 2017 showed that only 65% of Yes voters who backed Leave said they would back independence again. In contrast, the Scottish Conservatives argued that their party were negotiating a Brexit deal for the UK, and Ruth Davidson repeatedly stated her preference for a soft Brexit and stark opposition to a second independence referendum. This strategy appears to have functioned insofar as the Conservative resurgence in Scotland at the 2017 general election occurred predominantly amongst those who voted No in 2014, winning as much as 44% of the vote among this group (up 17 points since 2015), well ahead of Labour’s 36% whose more uncertain message on the constitutional issue has failed to make it profitable in terms of vote. More significantly perhaps is that the Scottish Conservatives obtained 8% of the vote among Yes voters, that is 5% more than in 2015. This progression among Yes voters is accounted for by the number of Leave voters among them. Indeed, just over one in five (21%) of those who voted Yes and Leave voted for the Scottish Conservatives in June 2017. Ruth Davidson’s

campaign thus clipped the wings of the Nationalists as she argued that an anticipated second independence referendum would be unfair to voters who had not been given sufficient time to make an informed decision.

- 26 Secondly, general elections in Scotland are paradoxical insofar as much of the policy agenda matters little because it is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The controversies over Theresa May's manifesto thus had little resonance in Scotland where the Scottish Tory leader was able to argue that it did not concern Scotland. Besides, May's most controversial policy on social care – the so-called “dementia tax” – was in fact more generous than the existing system in Scotland: while Scotland does provide free social care to the elderly in their own homes, only £26,000 of pensioners' assets are protected when they go into residential care rather than the £100,000 figure given by the Prime Minister. It was in none of the main Scottish parties' interests to explain how much more generous the UK Prime Minister's proposal was, and the issue was therefore absent from the Scottish campaign. Moreover, the Scottish Conservatives had declared themselves opposed to any changes to fox-hunting rules in Scotland before Theresa May controversially pledged in May 2017 that she would allow a free vote in Parliament over the relaxing of rules or repeal of the Hunting Act 2004. Davidson's Scottish Conservatives were able to exploit a grey area over which welfare policies were devolved to Scotland to rule out any cuts to winter fuel allowances in their manifesto, arguing that there was no need for cuts in fuel allowances in Scotland to fund the so-called “dementia tax” since the country would not be affected by it. With all potentially explosive issues contained north of the border, the Scottish Conservatives were thus able to concentrate on the constitutional issue and deliver positive results in Scotland, obtaining a total of 13 seats (+12) and increasing their share of the vote by 13.7%.

Conclusion

- 27 The results of both the European referendum of June 2016 and the general election of June 2017 proved just how different a political landscape Scotland had become after two decades of devolved government. Scotland's traditionally more left-wing political culture and the centre-left political consensus which has emerged in Holyrood in the last twenty years has meant that anti-European voices have had extremely feeble resonance north of the border: only 16.5% of Scots voted for pro-Brexit parties at the 2015 general election (14.9% voted for the Conservative Party and 1.6% for UKIP) and a majority of Scottish Conservative MPs and MSPs campaigned for Remain, a position strongly defended by their leader, Ruth Davidson. Ironically, the electoral comeback achieved by the Scottish Conservatives in Scotland in the 2017 general election, despite the losses suffered by their party in the rest of the UK, was made possible by their strong unionist stance and the divisions created by the Brexit debate within the Nationalist movement. Scottish Labour on the other hand, failed to emulate its British counterpart insofar as there was no significant swing to Labour in key seats in Scotland. The electoral campaign in Scotland was once again overshadowed by the constitutional question – over which Labour has had trouble defining a clear position – made all the more complex by the current Brexit negotiations and the looming prospect of seeing Scotland taken out of the EU despite a clear 62% majority in favour of Remain. The constitutional divide has come to dominate Scottish politics since the

introduction of devolution in 1999 and devolution itself has transformed Scotland's political landscape to the extent that many of the party dynamics or campaign issues prevalent in Westminster have little if no significance north of the border. The country now appears as having a self-contained political system of its own, functioning alongside rather than in coordination with the British political system. Yet, ironically, the Scottish Conservatives' 13 seats in the 2017 general election were crucial to Theresa May's ability to remain in office and Labour's electoral slump in Scotland has dented its chances of winning a general election. Today, no less than 29 Scottish constituencies are competitive between Labour and the SNP and the prospect for a change in Downing Street may therefore partly depend on a set of policy issues and debates far removed from those prevailing in Westminster.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Awan-Scully, Roger, *The End of British Party Politics?* (London, Biteback Publishing, 2018).
- Barnes, Eddie, 'Race for the Swing Vote', *Scotland on Sunday*, 20th February 2011.
- Brooks, Libby, 'Jeremy Corbyn "Can Help Labour Rebuild Scotland"', *Guardian*, 24th August 2016.
- Cameron, David, 'Scotland Speech', 16th February 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-pm-scotland-speech>
- Camp-Pietrain, Edwige, *L'Écosse et la tentation de l'indépendance. Le référendum d'autodétermination de 2014* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2014).
- Curtice, John, 'Does Scotland Want a Different Kind of Brexit?', NatCen Social Research and ScotCen Social Research, March 2017.
- Curtice, John, 'On the Myth of a Growing Sense of English Identity', What Scotland Thinks, blog, 29th November 2018, <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2018/11/on-the-myth-of-a-growing-sense-of-english-identity/>, last access 15th January 2019.
- Detterbeck, Klaus, *Multi-Level Party Politics in Western Europe* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- Duclos, Nathalie, *L'Écosse en quête d'indépendance. Le référendum de 2014* (Paris, Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2014).
- Hassan, Gerry and Shaw, Eric, *The Strange Death of Labour Scotland* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
- Hepburn, Eve, *Using Europe: Territorial Party Strategies in a Multi-level System* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010).
- Hopkin, Jonathan and Bradbury, Jonathan, 'British Statewide Parties and Multilevel Politics', *The Journal of Federalism*, 36, 2006, pp. 135–52.
- Laffin, Martin, Shaw, Eric and Taylor, Gerald, 'The New Sub-National Politics of the British Labour Party', *Party Politics*, n°13, 2007, pp. 88–108.

- Leruez, Jacques, *Le Système politique britannique de Winston Churchill à Tony Blair* (Paris, Armand Colin, 2001, second edition).
- Liddle, Andrew, *Ruth Davidson and the Resurgence of the Scottish Tories* (London, Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2018).
- Lynch, Peter, *The History of the Scottish National Party* (Cardiff, Welsh Academic Press, 2013, 2nd edition).
- Lynch, Peter, 'Bottom-up versus Top-down Campaigning at the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, XX:2, 2015.
- MacWhirter, Iain, *Tsunami. Scotland's Democratic Revolution* (Glasgow, Freight Books, 2015).
- Shipman, Tim, *Fallout. A Year of Political Mayhem* (London, William Collins, 2018).
- Simpkins, Fiona, 'The Conflicting Loyalties of the Scottish Labour Party', in Avril, Emmanuelle and Beliard, Yann (eds.), *Labour United and Divided from the 1830s to the Present* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018).
- Simpkins, Fiona, 'The 2016 Scottish Parliament Elections: Unionist Parties and the Constitutional Divide', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, XXII:4, 2017.
- Simpkins, Fiona, 'Challenging Theresa May's Vision of Brexit Britain: Ruth Davidson and the 2017 UK General Election', *Observatoire de la Société Britannique*, 21:1, pp. 141-160.

NOTES

1. Roger Awan-Scully, *The End of British Party Politics?* (London, Biteback Publishing, 2018), p. 13.
2. James Mitchell in Eddie Barnes, 'Race for the Swing Vote', *Scotland on Sunday*, 20th February 2011.
3. Jacques Leruez, *Le Système politique britannique de Winston Churchill à Tony Blair* (Paris, Armand Colin, 2001, second edition).
4. For a detailed analysis of this campaign, see Fiona Simpkins, 'Challenging Theresa May's Vision of Brexit Britain : Ruth Davidson and the 2017 UK General Election', *Observatoire de la société britannique*, 21:1, pp. 141-160.
5. John Curtice, 'On the Myth of a Growing Sense of English Identity', What Scotland Thinks, blog, 29th November 2018, <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2018/11/on-the-myth-of-a-growing-sense-of-english-identity/>, last accessed 21st June 2019.
6. The electoral system adopted by the Scottish Constitutional Convention for Scottish Parliament elections uses both the first-past-the-post method for constituency seats and the proportional Additional Member System for regional seats. Seventy three constituency members are elected using the first-past-the-post system in the same electoral constituencies used for general elections, and an additional 56 members are elected with the AMS on a regional basis (seven members per region for the eight regions of Scotland usually used for European elections). This was meant to provide Scotland with a more representative political arena with few overall majorities.
7. Peter Lynch, *The History of the Scottish National Party* (Cardiff, Welsh Academic Press, 2013, 2nd edition), p. 280.
8. Peter Lynch, 'Bottom-up versus Top-down Campaigning at the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, XX:2, 2015.
9. Fiona Simpkins, 'Better Together and the No Campaign: from Project Fear to Grace?', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, XX:2, 2015.

10. See Edwige Camp-Pietrain, *L'Écosse et la tentation de l'indépendance. Le référendum d'autodétermination de 2014* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2014); Nathalie Duclos, *L'Écosse en quête d'indépendance. Le référendum de 2014* (Paris, Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2014); Peter Lynch, *op. cit.*
11. Iain McWhirter, *Tsunami. Scotland's Democratic Revolution* (Glasgow, Freight Books, 2015).
12. Eve Hepburn, *Using Europe: Territorial Party Strategies in a Multi-level System* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010); Klaus Detterbeck, *Multi-Level Party Politics in Western Europe* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
13. Martin Laffin, Eric Shaw and Gerald Taylor, 'The New Sub-National Politics of the British Labour Party', *Party Politics*, 13, 2007, pp. 88–108.
14. Fiona Simpkins, 'The Conflicting Loyalties of the Scottish Labour Party', in Emmanuelle Avril and Yann Béliard (eds.), *Labour United and Divided from the 1830s to the Present* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 238–253.
15. Soon after his election, Tony Blair announced the nomination of a royal committee in charge of investigating the extent to which care could be financed by the elderly themselves. The final report of the Sutherland Committee was published in March 1999 and recommended universal free care to the elderly, a solution which was rejected outright by both the British Prime Minister and the Scottish First Minister Donald Dewar. Yet Dewar's sudden death in October 2000 was to represent a sudden shift in relations between Scottish Labour and the UK Labour Party. Indeed, the new First Minister, Henry McLeish, soon surprised his colleagues by making free care to the elderly one of his top priorities as head of the Scottish Executive, having been impressed with the arguments brought forward by the Sutherland report which stressed the absurdity of a system covering medical care for somebody with a heart disease but not for a person with Alzheimer's disease. Henry McLeish had broken the rules of New Labour policy-making: he had neither consulted the other members of the Scottish Executive, Scottish Minister for Health and Community Care Susan Deacon, or the British Labour Cabinet and was to face much pressure to back down. Downing Street eventually retaliated by cancelling the £23 million Attendance Allowance that was to be attributed to Scotland to fund care for the elderly, that is 20% of the budget that the Scottish Executive had counted on to fund its project.
16. Libby Brooks, 'Jeremy Corbyn "Can Help Labour Rebuild Scotland"', *Guardian*, 24th August 2016.
17. Jonathan Hopkin and Jonathan Bradbury, 'British statewide parties and multilevel politics', *The Journal of Federalism*, 36, 2006, pp. 135–52.
18. David Cameron, 'Scotland Speech', 16th February 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-pm-scotland-speech>, last accessed on 21st June 2019.

ABSTRACTS

The geographical divides that characterised the outcome of the June 2016 European referendum, with a Remain majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland and a Leave majority in England and in Wales, are symptomatic of the increasingly divergent electoral results of the last two decades in each of the four UK nations. While the roots of divergent political patterns across the UK may lay in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales and the long decline of the Conservatives north of the border, we shall contend that the introduction

of devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1999 had the most considerable impact on British party politics.

Les divisions géographiques qui caractérisèrent les résultats du référendum européen de juin 2016, avec une majorité favorable au maintien du Royaume-Uni au sein de l'Union Européenne en Écosse et en Irlande du Nord et une majorité opposée en Angleterre et au pays de Galles, sont symptomatiques des résultats électoraux de plus en plus divergents des quatre nations britanniques au cours de ces deux dernières décennies. Si ces tendances politiques divergentes puisent leurs racines dans l'émergence des partis nationalistes écossais et gallois des années 1960 et 1970 et le long déclin des conservateurs en Écosse, nous analyserons en quoi l'introduction de la dévolution en Écosse et au pays de Galles en 1999 eut un impact considérable sur le système britannique de partis politiques.

INDEX

Mots-clés: dévolution, politique écossaise, SNP, référendum sur l'indépendance de l'Écosse, Parlement écossais, Brexit

Keywords: devolution, Scottish politics SNP, Scottish independence referendum, Scottish Parliament, Brexit

AUTHOR

FIONA SIMPKINS

Université Lumière-Lyon 2, Triangle UMR 5206. Fiona Simpkins is a Senior Lecturer in British contemporary history and politics at the Université Lumière of Lyon (Lyon 2). Her main areas of research are devolution, Scottish politics and the constitutional debate in Scotland.